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SIX FROM SIRIUS

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IN PHASES I AND II . . .

We learned that six agents from Sirius Hub — Jakosa Lone, Skreed, Zematin-Lar, Grod, LaMasque, and Starn — have been despatched to forestall a simmering conflict between the worlds of Axellon and Balsamo.

Axellon's moon, Heavenstone, has been settled by outcast Spiritualists, now accused by Axellon officials of complicity with the Balsamoites; it is feared that Balsamo Parbeam weapons have been stationed on the moon. Scheduled Peace Negotiations are to take place on Heavenstone.

Even after being "rescued" from Roundwall, her own world's prison satellite, the Balsamo Peace Ambassador (and latent ESPer) Phaedra insists her incarceration was for her own protection. Her mind is changed, however, when Masterfax — the relentless fax-man assassin from Balsamo — comes after her blood, forcing the Six from Sirius to destroy their own ship, fleeing to Axellon in a pod.

There they encounter — and Phaedra makes telepathic contact with — the collective Life Essence of the Five Elders, original leaders of the Heavenstone Spiritualists, who have been slain by the Axellon military.

On Balsamo, Lt. Shrike has inspected a perfect fax-woman duplicate of Phaedra, declaring "her" ready for service.

Knowing he must keep Phaedra alive until the scheduled Peace Negotiations, to ensure her presence there, Jakosa Lone has decided to go to the moon in advance, there to wait out further developments.

AND NOW . . .
PHASE III HEAVENSTONE

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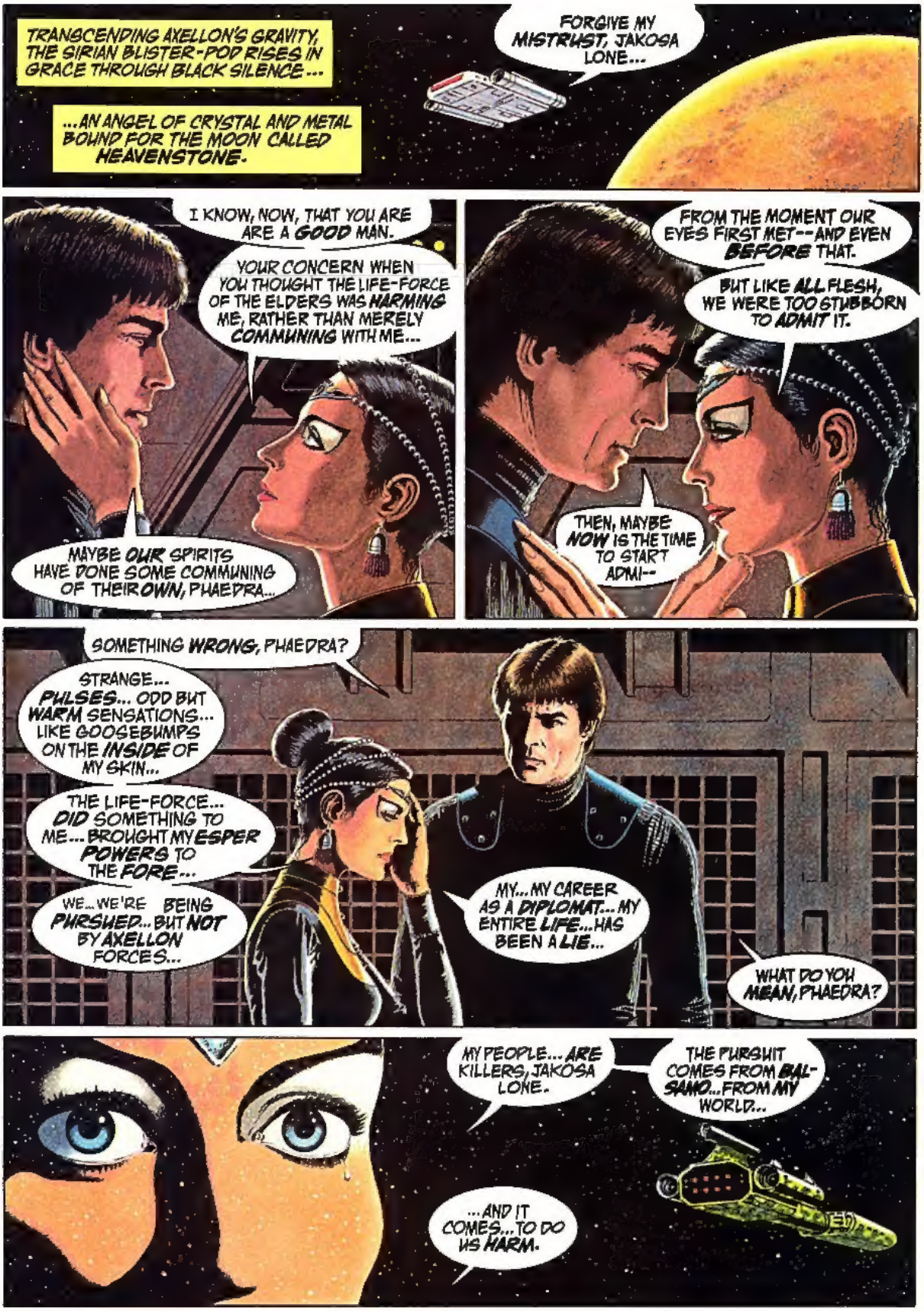
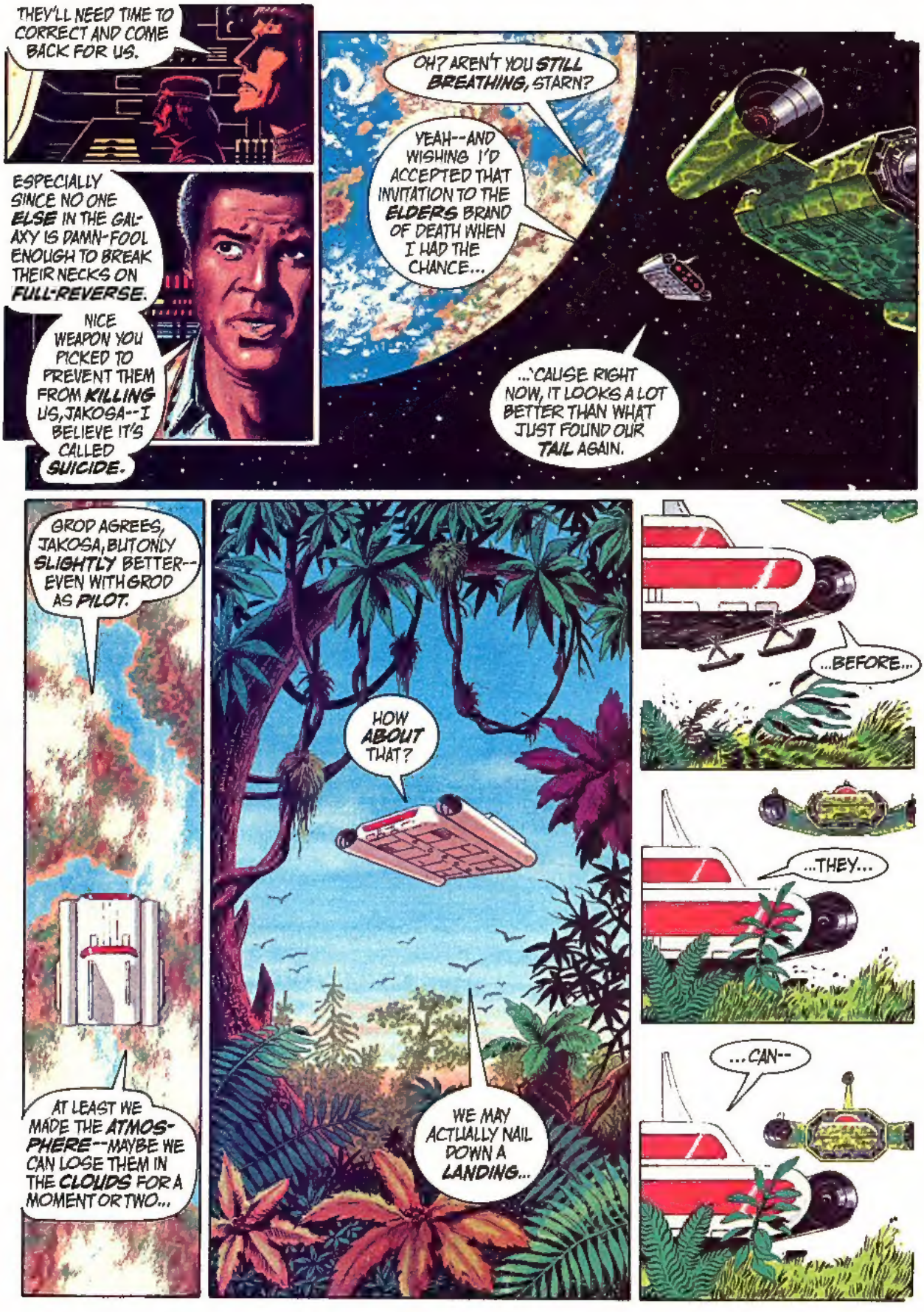

TRANSCENDING AXELLON'S GRAVITY, THE SIRIAN BLISTER-POD RISES IN GRACE THROUGH BLACK SILENCE...
...AN ANGEL OF CRYSTAL AND METAL BOUND FOR THE MOON CALLED HEAVENSTONE.
FORGIVE MY MISTRUST, JAKOSA LONE...
I KNOW, NOW, THAT YOU ARE ARE A GOOD MAN.
YOUR CONCERN WHEN YOU THOUGHT THE LIFE-FORCE OF THE ELDERS WAS HARMING ME, RATHER THAN MERELY COMMUNING WITH ME...
MAYBE OUR SPIRITS HAVE DONE SOME COMMUNING OF THEIR OWN, PHAEDRA...
FROM THE MOMENT OUR EYES FIRST MET--AND EVEN BEFORE THAT.
BUT LIKE ALL FLESH, WE WERE TOO STUBBORN TO ADMIT IT.
THEN, MAYBE NOW IS THE TIME TO START ADMI--
SOMETHING WRONG, PHAEDRA?
STRANGE... PULSES... ODD BUT WARM SENSATIONS... LIKE GOOSEBUMPS ON THE INSIDE OF MY SKIN...
THE LIFE-FORCE... DID SOMETHING TO ME... BROUGHT MY ESPER POWERS TO THE FORE...
WE... WE'RE BEING PURSUED... BUT NOT BY AXELLON FORCES...
MY... MY CAREER AS A DIPLOMAT... MY ENTIRE LIFE... HAS BEEN A LIE...
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, PHAEDRA?
MY PEOPLE... ARE KILLERS, JAKOSA LONE.
THE PURSUIT COMES FROM BAL-SAMO... FROM MY WORLD...
...AND IT COMES... TO DO US HARM.

JAKOSA-- ROUTINE SCAN OF BALSAMO REVEALS PURSUIT CRAFT.
IT MUST HAVE BEEN HOMING IN ON MASTERFAX-- AND NOW IT'S LOCKED ON US.
COMING FAST.
I... I SERVED THEM...
JAKOSA, DO YOU HEAR--?
...AND THEY PLOTTED IN DECEIT AGAINST ME...
I HEAR YOU, ZEMATIN-LAR.
GROD--JACK THIS THING TO MAX AND BURN FOR HEAVENSTONE--AS STRAIGHT AND TIGHT AS A LASER SPIT FROM HELL.
GROD CAN DO, JAKOSA, BUT EVEN OUR MAX WILL RUN BAD SECOND TO BALSAMO INTERCEPTOR.
THEN SHUT DOWN AND WAIT TO BE VAPORIZED! IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?
GROD WANTS NOTHING BUT PEACE OF MIND, JAKOSA-- AND LIVING MIND...
...BECAUSE GRAVE TOO PEACEFUL.
ALL RIGHT, THEN-- FULL MAX.
NOW LISTEN TO ME, PHAEDRA-- YOUR SENSITIVITY HAS BEEN HEIGHTENED.
DON'T LET THIS DISILLUSIONMENT AND BETRAYAL DROWN YOU...
HEH. GROD KNEW THAT WOULD WRENCH JAKOSA'S MIND BACK TO BUSINESS-- FOR MOMENTS ANYWAY.
SO YOU'RE NOT ONLY GREEN... BUT YOU'RE SHIFTY AS WELL, EH?
GROD IS GROD, SKREED.
WHO ARE YOU?
DROP IT, YOU TWO-!
BALSAMO CRAFT TRIPLING OUR VELOCITY!
...SO THERE ARE STILL SOME MINDS YOU CAN TRUST.
JAKOSA... I KNOW.

THEY'RE APPROACHING FIRING RANGE...
NEARER... NEARER...
RED ALERT
NOW!
TOO CLOSE.
YOU WERE RIGHT, GROD--WE'RE RUNNING A VERY BAD SECOND.
I HATE TO INTERRUPT, JAKOSA, BUT THEY'RE IN RANGE-- AND WE'RE IN DEEP TROUBLE FAR SHORT OF HEAVEN-STONE!
SORRY, PHAEDRA, BUT IT'S BACK TO KISSN--UH, BUSINESS.
STRAP IN.
SHARP ANGLE, GROD--THEN RE-VERSE THRUSTERS...
...FULL POWER.
BUT THE CONCUSSION OF DECELERA-TION--
FULL REVERSE-- NOW!
UHN! MY NECK-- BUT IT WORKED-- THEY OVERSHOT US!
NOW VEER BACK FOR HEAVENSTONE, GROD...


THEY'LL NEED TIME TO CORRECT AND COME BACK FOR US.
ESPECIALLY SINCE NO ONE ELSE IN THE GALAXY IS DAMN-FOOL ENOUGH TO BREAK THEIR NECKS ON FULL-REVERSE.
NICE WEAPON YOU PICKED TO PREVENT THEM FROM KILLING US, JAKOSA--I BELIEVE IT'S CALLED SUICIDE.
OH? AREN'T YOU STILL BREATHING, STARN?
YEAH--AND WISHING I'D ACCEPTED THAT INVITATION TO THE ELDERS BRAND OF DEATH WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE...
...'CAUSE RIGHT NOW, IT LOOKS A LOT BETTER THAN WHAT JUST FOUND OUR TAIL AGAIN.
GROD AGREES, JAKOSA, BUT ONLY SLIGHTLY BETTER--EVEN WITH GROD AS PILOT.
AT LEAST WE MADE THE ATMOSPHERE--MAYBE WE CAN LOSE THEM IN THE CLOUDS FOR A MOMENT OR TWO...
HOW ABOUT THAT?
WE MAY ACTUALLY NAIL DOWN A LANDING...
...BEFORE...
...THEY...
...CAN--

NNNNN... SO THIS IS HEAVEN.
WE'RE CRIPPLED-- ABANDON POD--TAKE NOTHING NONESSENTIAL!

TAKE PHAEDRA ALIVE--
--IF POSSIBLE.

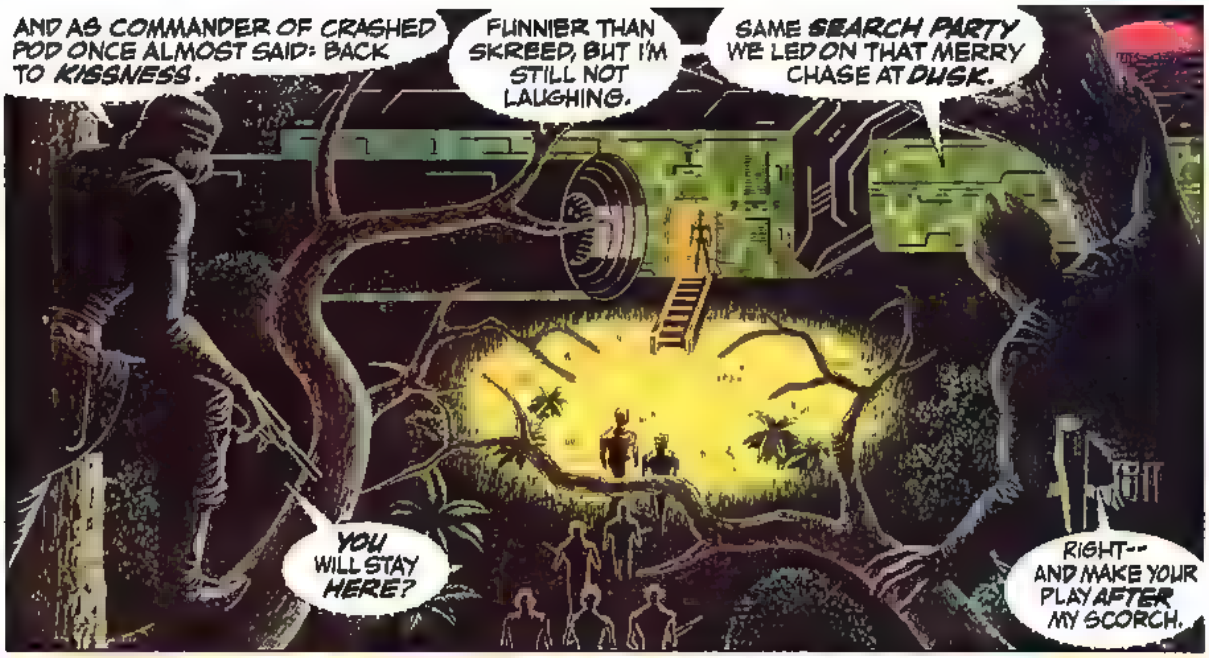
AND NOTHING NONESSENTIAL, FRIENDS, MEANS NOTHING BUT WEAPONS.
THE COMPUTER--!
MOVE, ZEMATIN!
YOU CAN CRY OVER THE LAST RITES LATER!

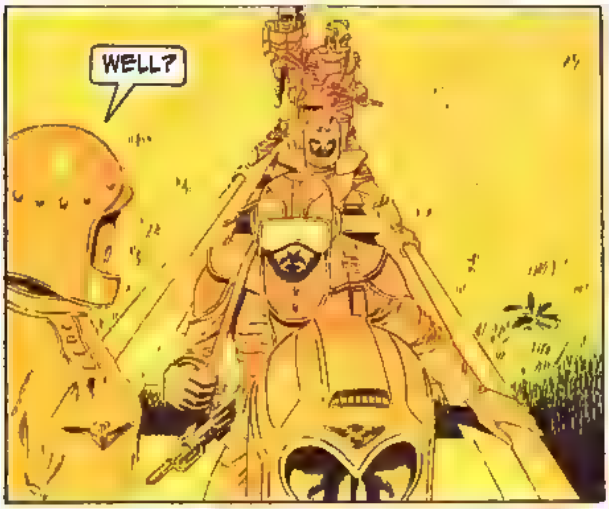
YOU REALIZE THEY'RE PROBABLY ALL FAX-MEN, DON'T YOU?
MEANING THEY'RE FEAR-LESS—THEY'VE GOT NOTHING TO LOSE!
BUT WE DO, LaMASQUE...
...AND THAT GIVES US EXTRA INCENTIVE!
YEAH? WELL, LET'S HOPE IT'S ALL PACKED INTO OUR LEGS...
...'CAUSE WE'LL NEED IT FOR THIS NEXT STEP.

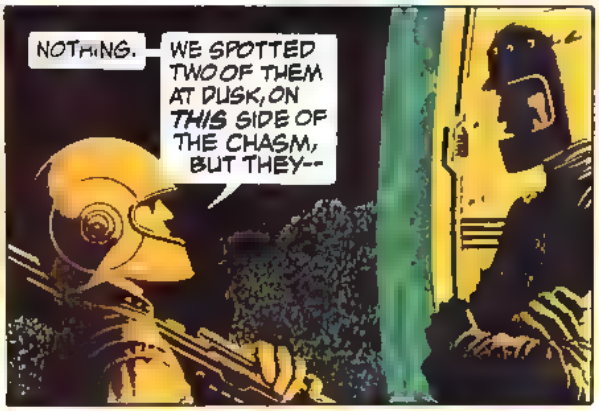
NOT EXACTLY A BONANZA OF OPTIONS, IS IT?
NOR DOES IT CONFORM TO ONE'S TYPICAL NOTION OF A MOON...
AND SO, LIKE THE MYTHICAL GOD TARZAN, THEY DID CROSS THE CHASM...
...WONDERING WHY HEAVEN IS SO INFERNALLY HOT.
COME ON, PHAEDRA-- YOU'RE NEXT.
VZZZZZZT
DOWN, PHAEDRA!

AHH-H!
JAKOSA!!
AYE, STARN--AND IT'S A STANDOFF.
WE CAN'T FIRE ON THEM WITHOUT HITTING PHAEDRA.
THEY'VE GOT PHAEDRA, SKREED--BUT AT LEAST THEY DON'T KNOW JAKOSA'S STILL ALIVE.
THEY'RE BACKING OFF--AT LEAST FOR NOW.
YES--TAKING PHAEDRA TO THEIR SHIP... BUT THEY'LL BE BACK FOR US, LaMASQUE.
AYE--THEY KNOW WE CAN'T GET FAR, BUT THEY CAN'T AFFORD TO LET US TRY, EITHER.
GROD WILL GO TO OTHER SIDE--
--AND GET JAKOSA.

GROD AND I WILL GO BACK FOR PHAEDRA.
OUR MISSION STANDS A BETTER CHANCE OF SUCCESS IF WE CAN PRODUCE HER AT THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND--
JAKOSA, YOU DON'T HAVE TO JUSTIFY HER RESCUE TO US.
WE KNOW HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT--
ALL RIGHT, I WON'T JUSTIFY IT-- I'LL JUST DO IT-- WHILE THE REST OF YOU KEEP GOING UNTIL YOU FIND A DECENT PLACE TO HOLE UP.
TRANSMIT ON SECURE-FREQUENCY EVERY CYCLE ON THE CYCLE.
EITHER WE'LL RETURN WITH PHAEDRA OR WE WON'T.
ZEMATIN, IF WE DON'T LINK UP BY DAWN, YOU'RE IN COMMAND--AND YOU'LL JUST HAVE TO COMPLETE THE MISSION AS BEST YOU CAN.
WITHOUT PHAEDRA?!
IMPROVISE, LOVER.
HNH--MAYBE BEING IN COMMAND WON'T BE SO TOUGH... IF I CAN ISSUE ORDERS LIKE THAT ONE.
ALL RIGHT-- LET'S MOVE.
BY NIGHTFALL, EVERYTHING ON HEAVENSTONE IS EERILY ALIEN--INCLUDING NIGHT ITSELF.
THE PLANET-FORMING OF THIS MOON WAS IMPRESSIVE WHEN WE CAME DOWN, JAKOSA... BUT RIGHT NOW IT FEELS LIKE THEY LEFT OUT THE LIGHTS.
NEVER KNOWN YOU TO BE AFRAID OF THE DARK.
THEN YOU TALK TOO MUCH WHEN YOU'RE NERVOUS, GROD--AND THERE'S THE BALSAMO CRUISER.
NOT AFRAID, BUT BECAUSE A PLACE CALLED HEAVENSTONE SOUNDS TOO CLOSE TO PEACE OF GRAVE, MAYBE GROD IS NERVOUS...
AH.
ABOUT TIME.


AND AS COMMANDER OF CRASHED POD ONCE ALMOST SAID: BACK TO KISSNESS.
FUNNIER THAN SKREED, BUT I'M STILL NOT LAUGHING.
SAME SEARCH PARTY WE LED ON THAT MERRY CHASE AT DUSK.
YOU WILL STAY HERE?
RIGHT-- AND MAKE YOUR PLAY AFTER MY SCORCH.


WELL?


NOTHING.
WE SPOTTED TWO OF THEM AT DUSK, ON THIS SIDE OF THE CHASM, BUT THEY--

AGH-H!!
WHO THE--?!

JAKOSA LONE.
AND UP HERE, GROD'S NAME IS--
--GROD.

HURRY, JAKOSA! FIND PHAEDRA BEFORE THE OTHERS--

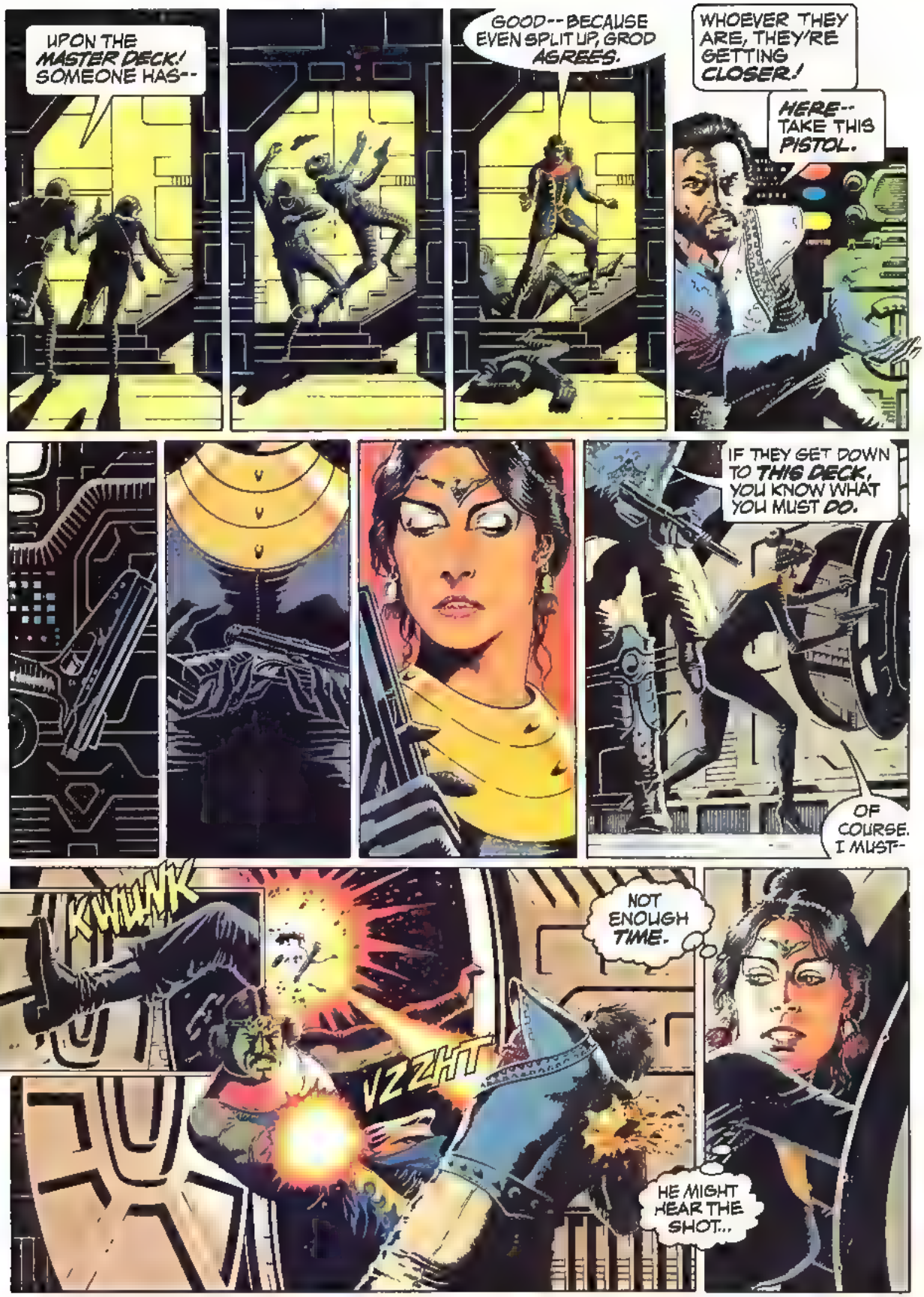
I THINK I KNOW THE TUNE BY NOW, GROD.

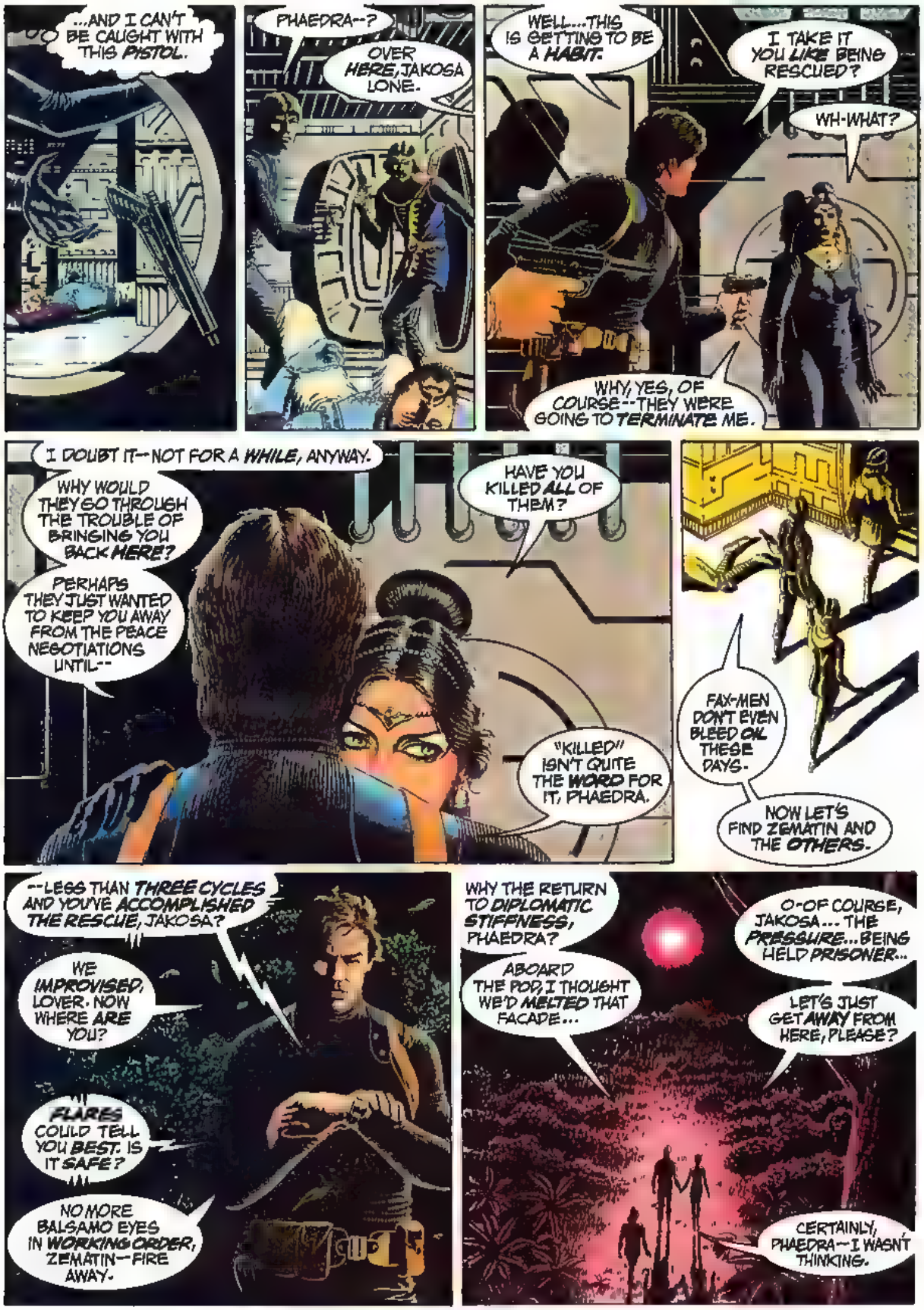
JAKOSA... DO YOU THINK WE MAKE GOOD TEAM?

A TERRIFIC TEAM, GROD.

FABULOUS.

NOW SPLIT UP!


UPON THE MASTER DECK! SOMEONE HAS--
GOOD--BECAUSE EVEN SPLIT UP, GROD AGREES.
WHOEVER THEY ARE, THEY'RE GETTING CLOSER!
HERE--TAKE THIS PISTOL.
IF THEY GET DOWN TO THIS DECK, YOU KNOW WHAT YOU MUST DO.
OF COURSE. I MUST--
KWUNK
VZZHT
NOT ENOUGH TIME.
HE MIGHT HEAR THE SHOT...


...AND I CAN'T BE CAUGHT WITH THIS PISTOL.
PHAEDRA--?
OVER HERE, JAKOSA LONE.
WELL...THIS IS GETTING TO BE A HABIT.
I TAKE IT YOU LIKE BEING RESCUED?
WH-WHAT?
WHY, YES, OF COURSE--THEY WERE GOING TO TERMINATE ME.
I DOUBT IT--NOT FOR A WHILE, ANYWAY.
WHY WOULD THEY GO THROUGH THE TROUBLE OF BRINGING YOU BACK HERE?
PERHAPS THEY JUST WANTED TO KEEP YOU AWAY FROM THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS UNTIL--
HAVE YOU KILLED ALL OF THEM?
"KILLED" ISN'T QUITE THE WORD FOR IT, PHAEDRA.
FAX-MEN DON'T EVEN BLEED OIL THESE DAYS.
NOW LET'S FIND ZEMATIN AND THE OTHERS.
--LESS THAN THREE CYCLES AND YOU'VE ACCOMPLISHED THE RESCUE, JAKOSA?
WE IMPROVISED, LOVER. NOW WHERE ARE YOU?
FLARES COULD TELL YOU BEST. IS IT SAFE?
NO MORE BALSAMO EYES IN WORKING ORDER, ZEMATIN--FIRE AWAY.
WHY THE RETURN TO DIPLOMATIC STIFFNESS, PHAEDRA?
ABOARD THE POD, I THOUGHT WE'D MELTED THAT FACADE...
O-OF COURSE, JAKOSA... THE PRESSURE...BEING HELD PRISONER...
LET'S JUST GET AWAY FROM HERE, PLEASE?
CERTAINLY, PHAEDRA--I WASN'T THINKING.

AND SOON...
WHAT THE--?!
HEAVENSTONER ABOS-- THE SPIRITUALIST REFUGEES FROM AXELLON...
IT'S ONE OF THEIR SETTLEMENTS.
WELCOME, JAKOSA!
NOW THESE ARE MY KIND OF SPIRITUALISTS, EH?
THE KIND WHOSE SPIRITS ARE STILL JOYOUSLY BOUND IN FLESH!
AMEN.

ENTER OUR EMBRACE WITH A WARM HEART AND NO FEAR, JAKOSA LONE.

YOUR COMPANIONS HAVE SPOKEN OF YOU IN WORDS FORMED BY SMILES.

TH-THANK YOU.

GROD WAS WRONG...

PLANET-FORMING PERFECT, JAKOSA.

WHO NEEDS LIGHTS?

WHO... INDEED?

WELL, "LOVER"?

IS THIS A DECENT ENOUGH PLACE TO "HOLE UP IN"?

NOT EXACTLY WHAT I IMAGINED FOR A GROUP OF PERSECUTED SPIRITUALISTS... BUT APPARENTLY IT'LL DO.

LaMASQUE SEEMS TO THINK SO...

GATHER ROUND, BOYS--AS MY GROUP'S EXPERT ON ALIEN RELATIONS, IT'S MY DUTY TO EXPERIENCE ALL OF YOUR CUSTOMS...

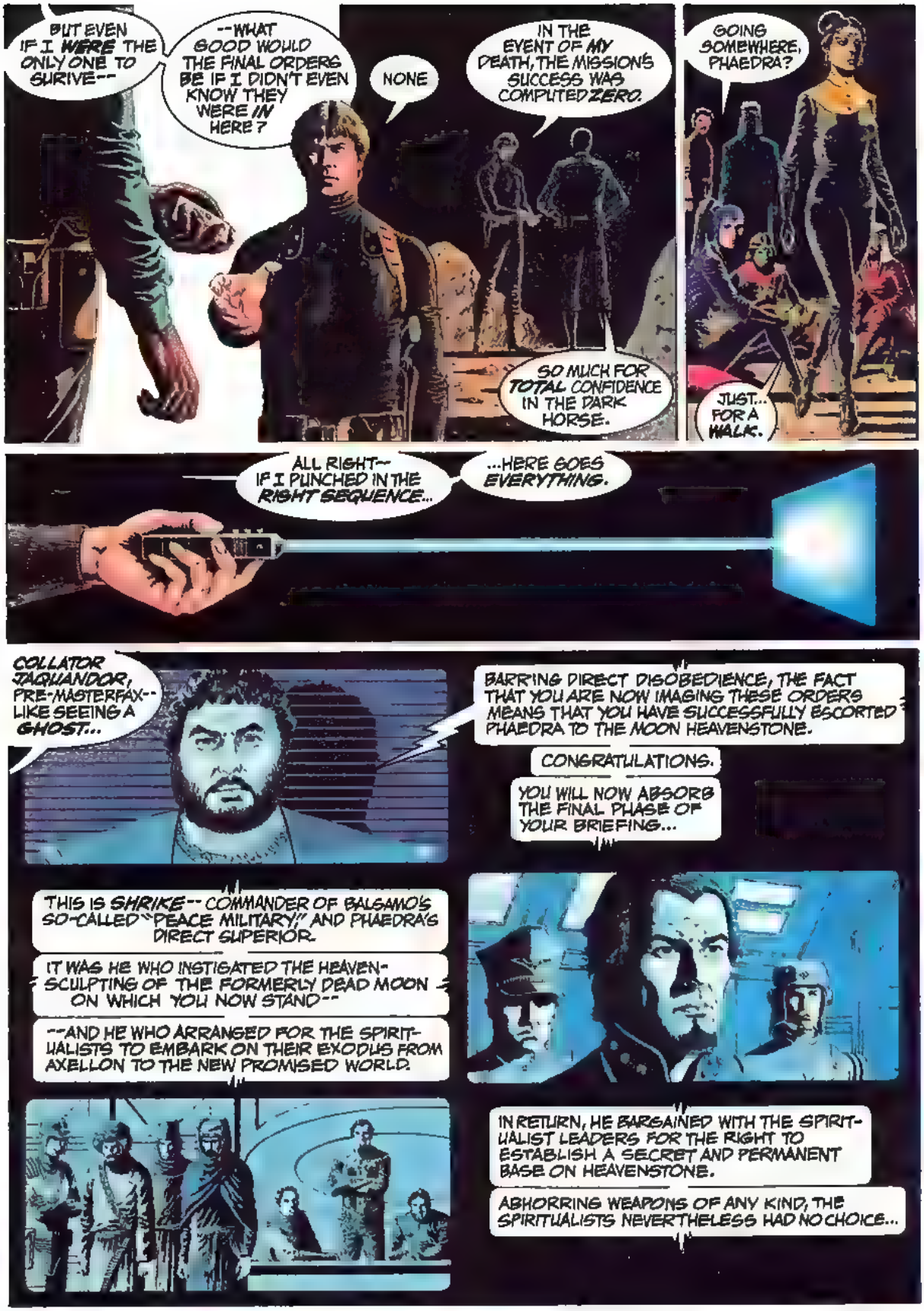
AND CLOSE YOUR MOUTH, JAKOSA--BEFORE I TOSS A GRAPE IN IT.

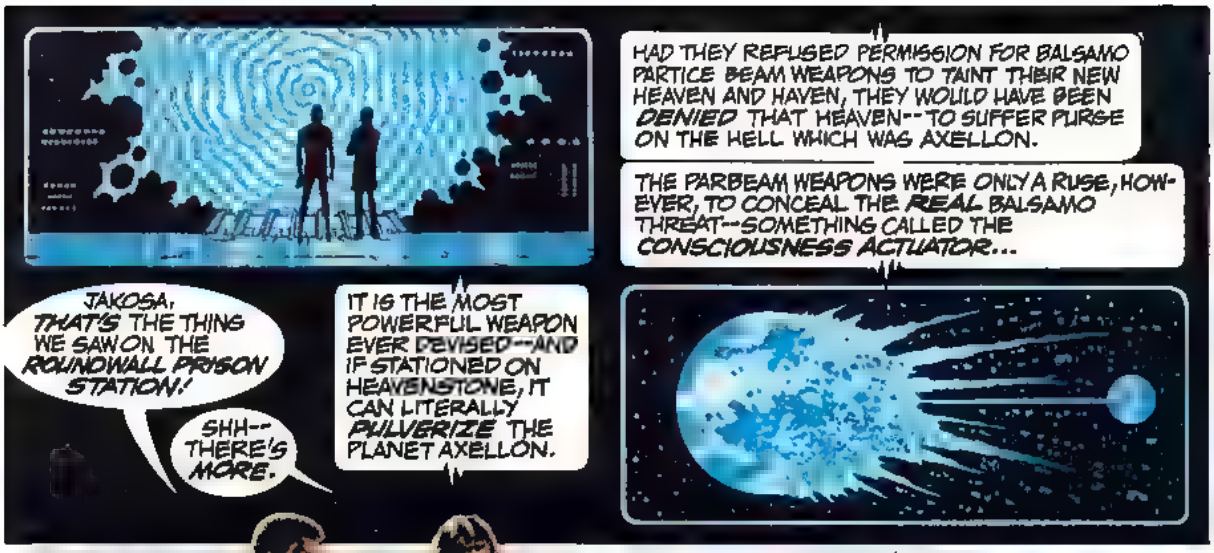
SOMEONE... OUT THERE...

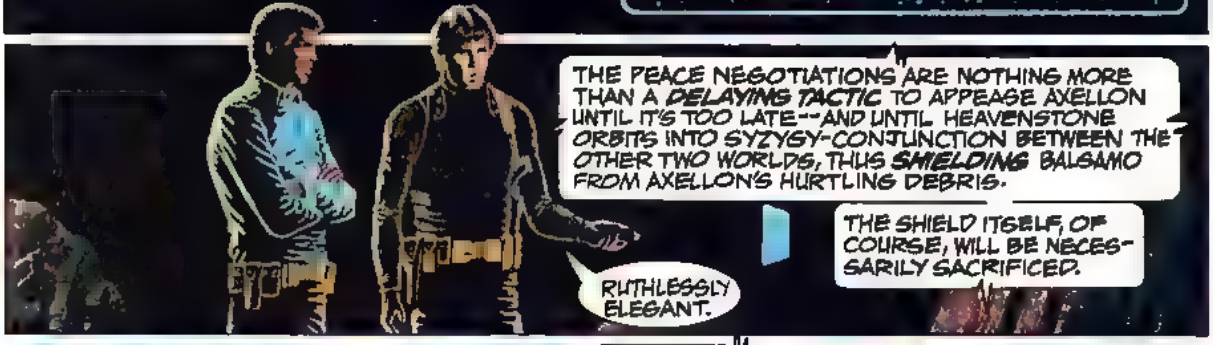
Still alive.

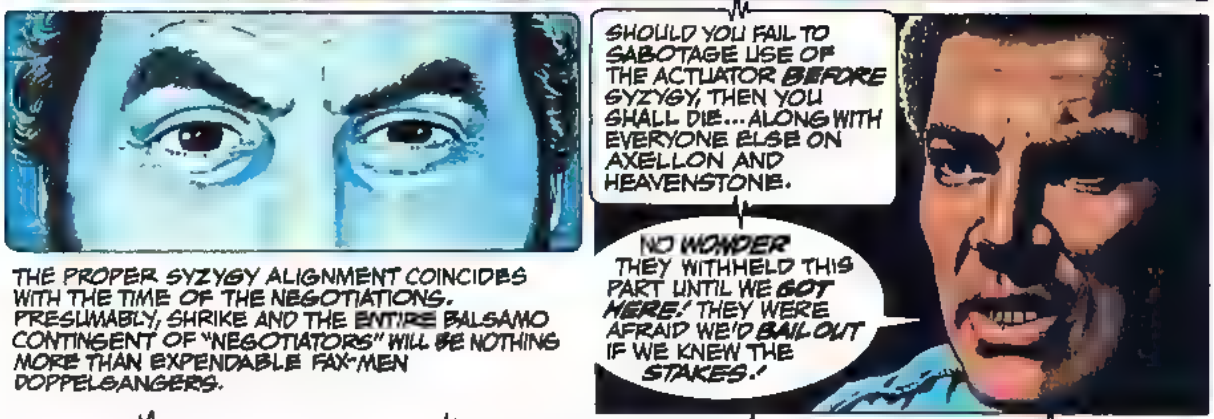
Coming this way.
Closer.
With weapon in hand.
Murder in mind.
Must reach peak.
Mind-Prime.
Mind-Prime.
Mind-Prime!
A FAX-MAN--AND MORE PROOF THE ELDERS WERE RIGHT...
EVEN MACHINES CAN BE REACHED BY MIND-PRIME.
AND IF THEY'RE ALL FAX-MEN, AS SKREED SUSPECTED--
--THERE MAY BE NO REAL BALSAMOITES ATTENDING THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS.
THE ONLY FLESH AND BLOOD ON HEAVENSTONE WILL BELONG TO THOSE MARKED FOR DEATH.
THE SPIRITUALISTS...JAKOSA LONE'S CREW.. AND ME.
ALREADY, KNOTS LOOSEN AND BEGIN TO UNTIE THEMSELVES.

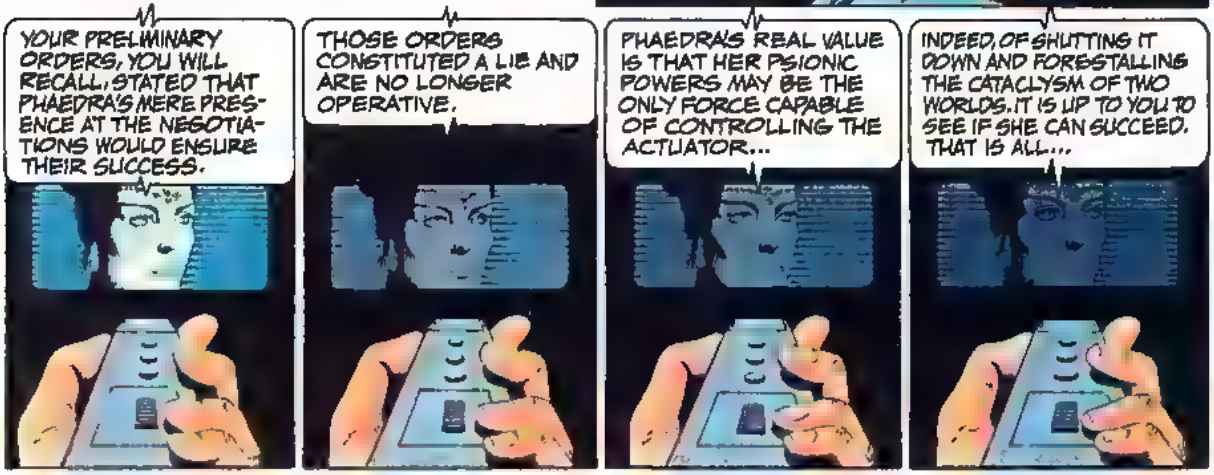
PURE SPLENDOR, WOMAN--THAT'S WHAT YOU'VE GOT HERE.
HARD INDEED TO BELIEVE THIS WAS ONCE A DEAD SPECK IN THE EYE OF NOTHINGNESS.
WHOEVER SCULPTED IT WAS ONE HELL OF AN ARTIST...
HIS NAME WAS PINDARO--GREAT-GRANDFATHER OF YOUR COMPANION PHAEDRA.
HE WAS THE ARTIST, YES...BUT WHO WAS HIS PATRON, HIS BENEFACTOR, I WONDER?
THE BALSAMOITES? DID THEY FUND IT?
I... WOULD NOT KNOW. HEAVENSTONERS LEARN TO ACCEPT WITHOUT QUESTION.
FSSST--STARN.
THAT WAS GOOD DRINK AND BETTER WOMAN, JAKOSA.
THIS'D BETTER BE--
IT IS, STARN.
TIME TO BREAK OUT THE FINAL ORDERS FROM SIRIUS HUB.
GIVE ME YOUR BOX, STARN.
THEY'RE IN MINE?
WHY MINE?
YOUR SURVIVABILITY WAS COMPUTED HIGHEST.
WELL, I KNEW THERE HAD TO BE SOME ADVANTAGE TO BEING WEAPONS OFFICER...


BUT EVEN IF I WERE THE ONLY ONE TO SURIVE--
--WHAT GOOD WOULD THE FINAL ORDERS BE IF I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THEY WERE IN HERE?
NONE
IN THE EVENT OF MY DEATH, THE MISSION'S SUCCESS WAS COMPUTED ZERO.
SO MUCH FOR TOTAL CONFIDENCE IN THE DARK HORSE.
GOING SOMEWHERE, PHAEDRA?
JUST... FOR A WALK.
ALL RIGHT-- IF I PUNCHED IN THE RIGHT SEQUENCE...
...HERE GOES EVERYTHING.
COLLATOR JAQUANDOR, PRE-MASTERFAX-- LIKE SEEING A GHOST...
BARRING DIRECT DISOBEDIENCE, THE FACT THAT YOU ARE NOW IMAGING THESE ORDERS MEANS THAT YOU HAVE SUCCESSFULLY ESCORTED PHAEDRA TO THE MOON HEAVENSTONE.
CONGRATULATIONS.
YOU WILL NOW ABSORB THE FINAL PHASE OF YOUR BRIEFING...
THIS IS SHRIKE-- COMMANDER OF BALSAMO'S SO-CALLED "PEACE MILITARY," AND PHAEDRA'S DIRECT SUPERIOR.
IT WAS HE WHO INSTIGATED THE HEAVEN-SCULPTING OF THE FORMERLY DEAD MOON ON WHICH YOU NOW STAND--
--AND HE WHO ARRANGED FOR THE SPIRITUALISTS TO EMBARK ON THEIR EXODUS FROM AXELLON TO THE NEW PROMISED WORLD.
IN RETURN, HE BARGAINED WITH THE SPIRITUALIST LEADERS FOR THE RIGHT TO ESTABLISH A SECRET AND PERMANENT BASE ON HEAVENSTONE.
ABHORRING WEAPONS OF ANY KIND, THE SPIRITUALISTS NEVERTHELESS HAD NO CHOICE...


HAD THEY REFUSED PERMISSION FOR BALSAMO PARTICE BEAM WEAPONS TO TAINT THEIR NEW HEAVEN AND HAVEN, THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN DENIED THAT HEAVEN--TO SUFFER PURSE ON THE HELL WHICH WAS AXELLON.
THE PARBEAM WEAPONS WERE ONLY A RUSE, HOWEVER, TO CONCEAL THE REAL BALSAMO THREAT--SOMETHING CALLED THE CONSCIOUSNESS ACTUATOR...
JAKOSA, THAT'S THE THING WE SAW ON THE ROUNDWALL PRISON STATION!
SHH--THERE'S MORE.
IT IS THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON EVER DEVISED--AND IF STATIONED ON HEAVENSTONE, IT CAN LITERALLY PULVERIZE THE PLANET AXELLON.


THE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS ARE NOTHING MORE THAN A DELAYING TACTIC TO APPEASE AXELLON UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE--AND UNTIL HEAVENSTONE ORBITS INTO SYZYGY-CONJUNCTION BETWEEN THE OTHER TWO WORLDS, THUS SHIELDING BALSAMO FROM AXELLON'S HURTLING DEBRIS.
THE SHIELD ITSELF, OF COURSE, WILL BE NECESSARILY SACRIFICED.
RUTHLESSLY ELEGANT.


THE PROPER SYZYGY ALIGNMENT COINCIDES WITH THE TIME OF THE NEGOTIATIONS. PRESUMABLY, SHRIKE AND THE ENTIRE BALSAMO CONTINGENT OF "NEGOTIATORS" WILL BE NOTHING MORE THAN EXPENDABLE FAX-MEN DOPPELGANGERS.
SHOULD YOU FAIL TO SABOTAGE USE OF THE ACTUATOR BEFORE SYZYGY, THEN YOU SHALL DIE... ALONG WITH EVERYONE ELSE ON AXELLON AND HEAVENSTONE.
NO WONDER THEY WITHHELD THIS PART UNTIL WE GOT HERE! THEY WERE AFRAID WE'D BAIL OUT IF WE KNEW THE STAKES!


YOUR PRELIMINARY ORDERS, YOU WILL RECALL, STATED THAT PHAEDRA'S MERE PRESENCE AT THE NEGOTIATIONS WOULD ENSURE THEIR SUCCESS.
THOSE ORDERS CONSTITUTED A LIE AND ARE NO LONGER OPERATIVE.
PHAEDRA'S REAL VALUE IS THAT HER PSIONIC POWERS MAY BE THE ONLY FORCE CAPABLE OF CONTROLLING THE ACTUATOR...
INDEED, OF SHUTTING IT DOWN AND FORESTALLING THE CATACLYSM OF TWO WORLDS. IT IS UP TO YOU TO SEE IF SHE CAN SUCCEED. THAT IS ALL...

THE BASTARDS!

PLAYING WITH OUR HEADS-- WITH OUR LIVES-- LIKE THAT!

BUREAUCRATIC HIERARCHIES WORK ON MANY LEVELS, STARN.

THE BOTTOM LEVEL IS USUALLY RESERVED FOR HUMAN LIFE.

BUT THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF THIS MISSION IS TO SAVE HUMAN LIFE! WHY COULDN'T SIRIUS HUB HAVE FAITH THAT WE'D--

WRONG-- THE WHOLE PURPOSE IS SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY.

WHAT...?

YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED THESE, STARN?

CIDRION CRYSTALS!

THE VITAL COMPONENT OF SIRIAN TECHNOLOGY-- USED IN EVERYTHING FROM MATTER TRANSMITTERS TO STARDRIVE SYSTEMS-- AND THE RAREST ELEMENT IN THE GALAXY...

EXCEPT HERE ON HEAVENSTONE.--

--WHERE THEY LITTER THE LANDSCAPE VIRTUALLY EVERYWHERE, RIPE FOR EASY PICKINGS...

A BYPRODUCT OF THE PLANET-FORMING PROCESS.

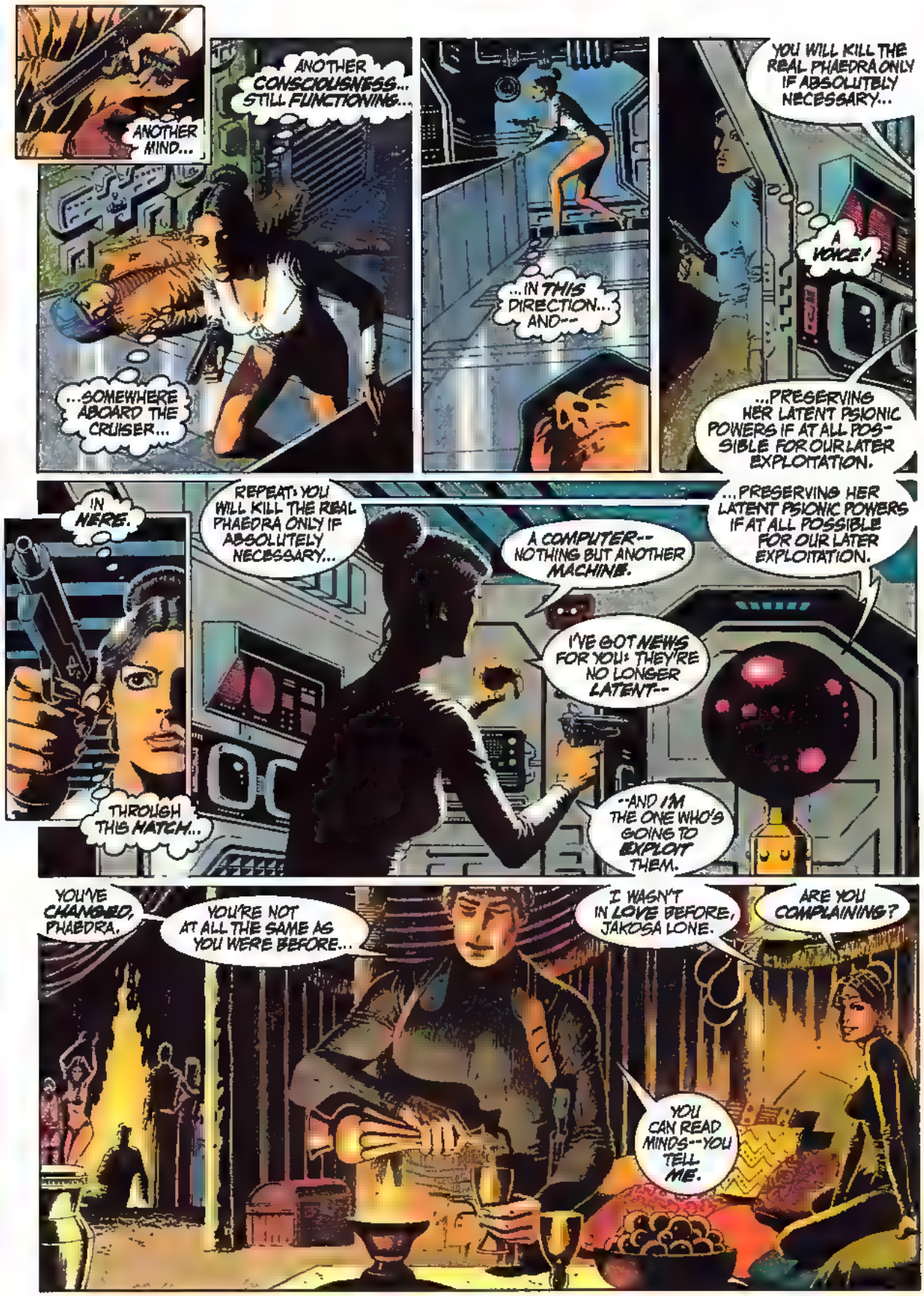
THEN PHAEDRA'S INTUITION WAS RIGHT ABOUT OUR "ALTRUISTIC" BOSSES BACK AT SIRIUS...

THEY'RE IN THIS FOR NOTHING BUT MONEY.

WANT TO QUIT, STARN?

YEAH.

EVEN THOUGH IT'LL MEAN THE DESTRUCTION OF HEAVEN AND HELL?
I SAID I WANTED TO QUIT, JAKOSA...
I DIDN'T SAY I WANTED TO ABORT THE MISSION--BUT FROM HERE ON, LET'S BE SELF-EMPLOYED.
YOU GOT IT.
NOW... READY FOR THE LAST SURPRISE?
SPIT IT OUT, LONE.
YOUR BOX IS ALSO EQUIPPED WITH A HOMING DEVICE--PRESUMABLY ATTUNED TO THE FREQUENCY OF THE SO-CALLED "CONSCIOUSNESS ACTUATOR."
JUST FOLLOW THE BEEPS AND FREEK ME WHEN YOU FIND SOMETHING.
YEAH--AND IF THE BEEPER FADES...
...AT LEAST THERE'S PLENTY OF SPARE CRYSTALS AROUND.
YOU'RE GAME?
AND THEN SOME.
BUT WHEN WE GET CONTROL OF THIS DAMN ACTUATOR, LET'S USE IT TO BRING SIRIUS HUB DOWN IN PIECES.
YEAH.
MAYBE WE WILL, AT THAT.
JAKOSA?
IT'S ME, PHAEDRA.
SOMETHING WRONG?
NO, IT... IT'S JUST SO BEAUTIFUL HERE... ENOUGH TO MELT AWAY ALL TRACE OF STIFFNESS..
I THOUGHT WE MIGHT GO BACK TO ONE OF THE TENTS... FOR PRIVACY...
I JUST SAW SOMETHING BAD, PHAEDRA, THE FACE OF MY OWN BETRAYAL AND DISILLUSIONMENT...
GIVEN YOUR NEW SENSITIVITY, ARE YOU SURE MY PRESENT STATE OF MIND WON'T CAUSE SOME INTERFERENCE?
GIVEN MY NEW SENSITIVITY, JAKOSA LONE...
...MY GOAL IS TO ALTER YOUR STATE OF MIND.


ANOTHER MIND...
ANOTHER CONSCIOUSNESS... STILL FUNCTIONING...
...SOMEWHERE ABOARD THE CRUISER...
...IN THIS DIRECTION... AND--
A VOICE!
YOU WILL KILL THE REAL PHAEDRA ONLY IF ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY...
...PRESERVING HER LATENT PSIONIC POWERS IF AT ALL POSSIBLE FOR OUR LATER EXPLOITATION.
IN HERE.
THROUGH THIS HATCH...
REPEAT: YOU WILL KILL THE REAL PHAEDRA ONLY IF ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY...
A COMPUTER-- NOTHING BUT ANOTHER MACHINE.
I'VE GOT NEWS FOR YOU: THEY'RE NO LONGER LATENT--
--AND I'M THE ONE WHO'S GOING TO EXPLOIT THEM.
...PRESERVING HER LATENT PSIONIC POWERS IF AT ALL POSSIBLE FOR OUR LATER EXPLOITATION.
YOU'VE CHANGED, PHAEDRA.
YOU'RE NOT AT ALL THE SAME AS YOU WERE BEFORE...
I WASN'T IN LOVE BEFORE, JAKOSA LONE.
ARE YOU COMPLAINING?
YOU CAN READ MINDS--YOU TELL ME.

NO.

I WOULD PREFER, JAKOSA LONE, THAT YOU... SHOW ME.

EH?!

EVEN A TASTE AS FOUL AS THAT--

--IS WORTH YOUR BLOOD.

PHAEDRA--!

A BALSAMO DOUBLE-AGENT ALL ALONG--?!

VZZHT

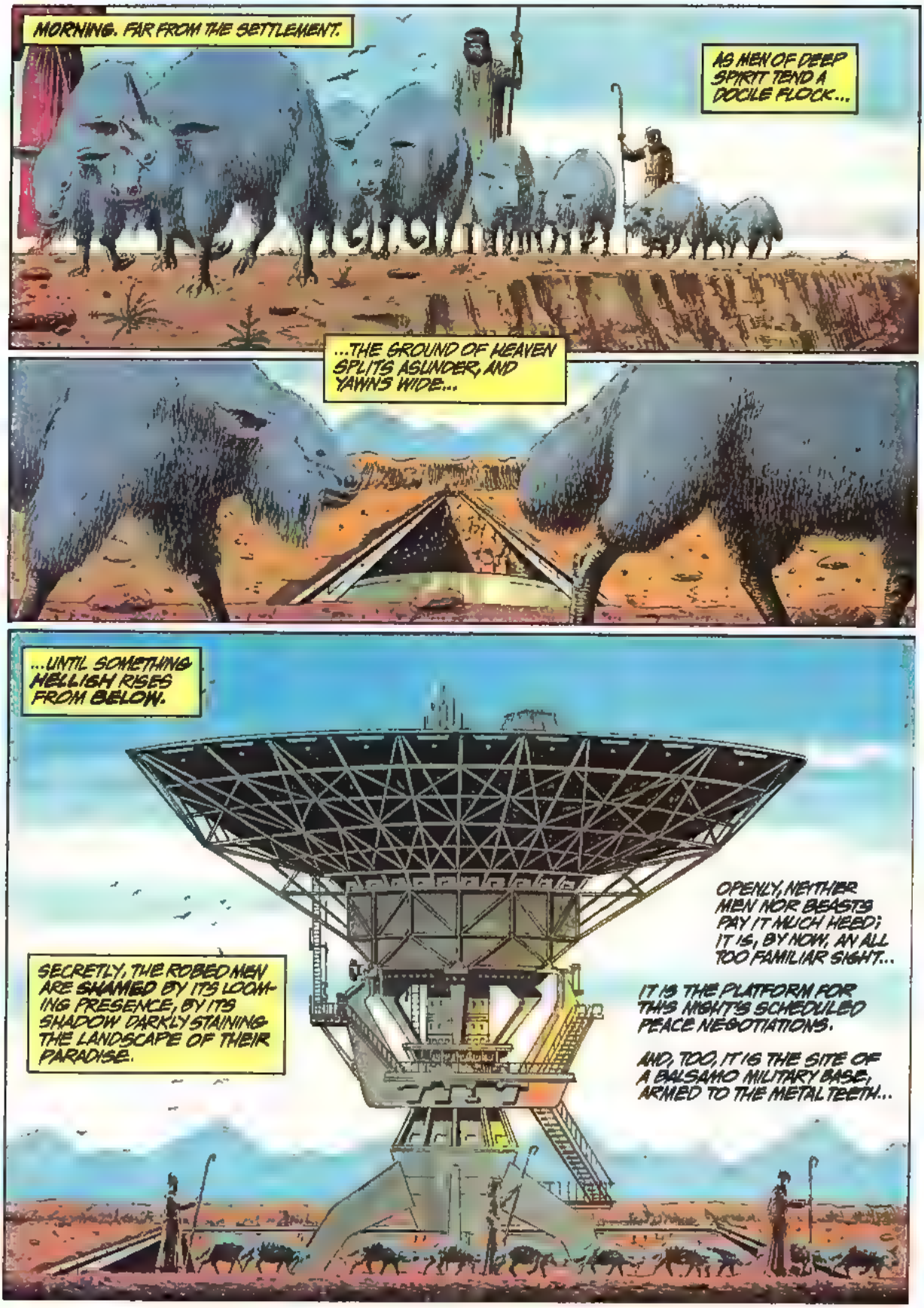
NOT ALL ALONG, JAKOSA-- JUST TONIGHT.

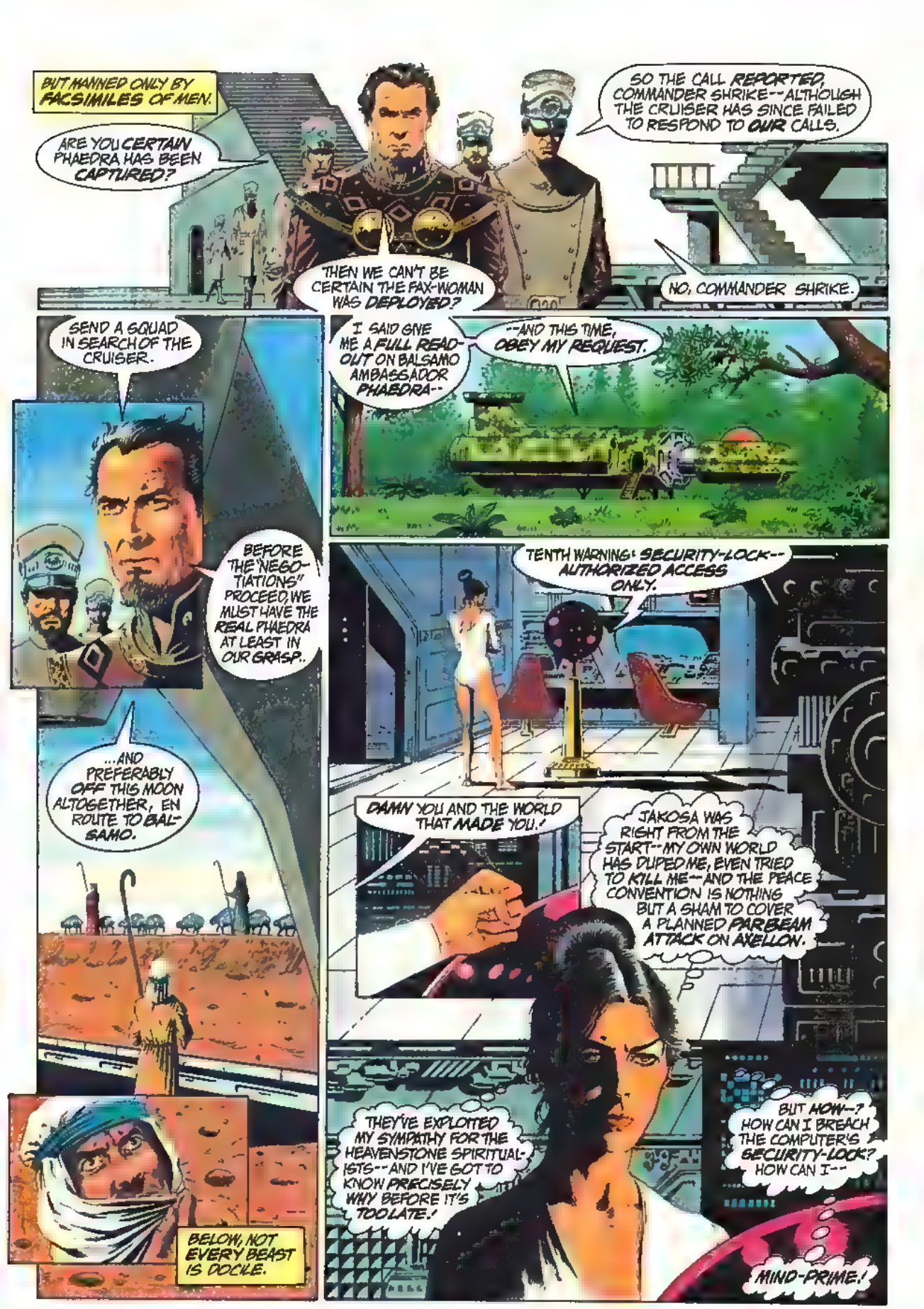
AS YOU'RE SO FOND OF POINTING OUT, I HAVE A "SOLENOID SOUL"-- AN AFFINITY FOR MACHINES--AND EVER SINCE YOU BROUGHT HER BACK FROM THE BALSAMO CRUISER...

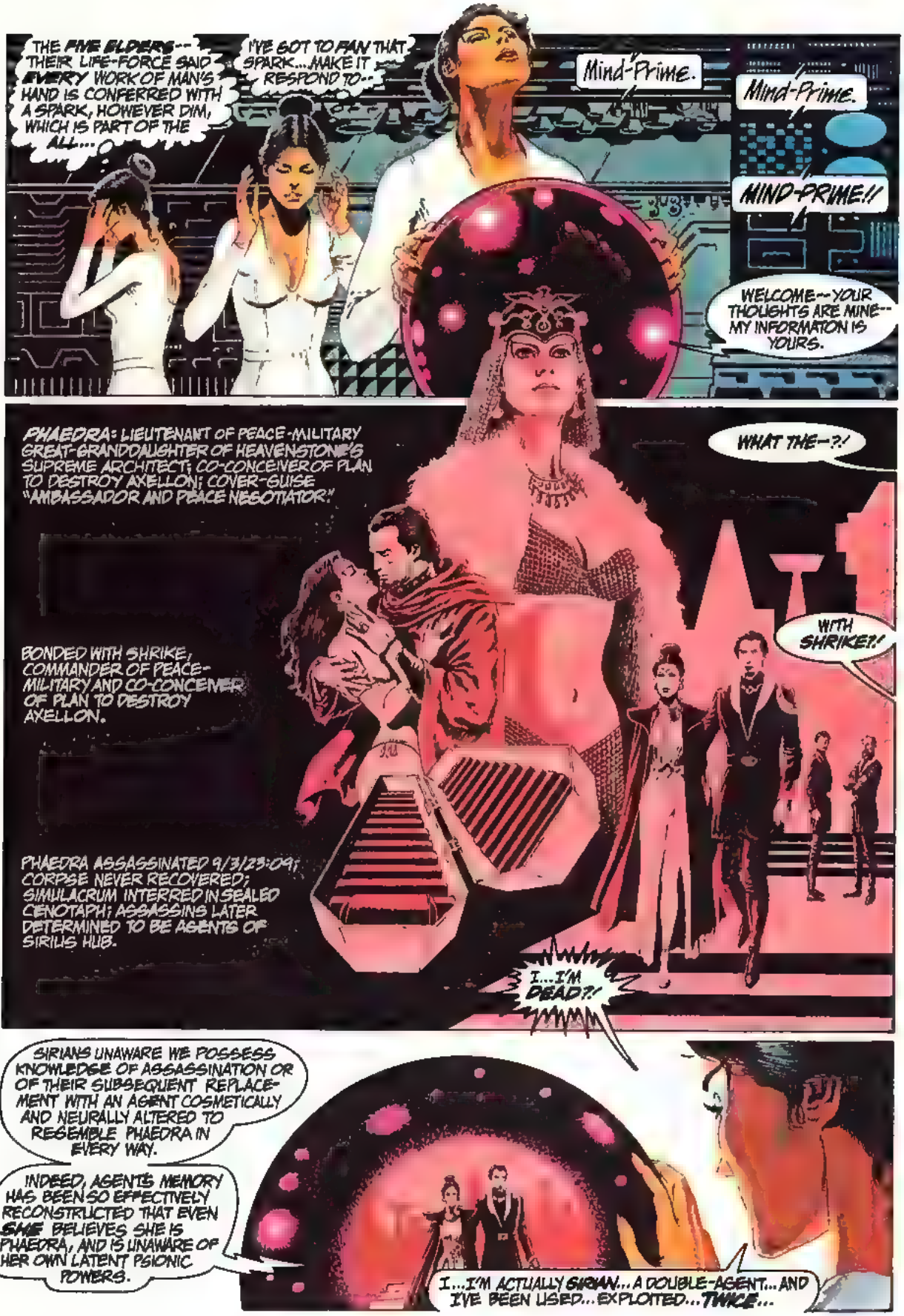
...I'VE HAD THE DISTINCT FEELING THAT OUR NEW "PHAEDRA" IS SOMETHING LESS THAN FLESH AND BLOOD.

A FAX-WOMAN.

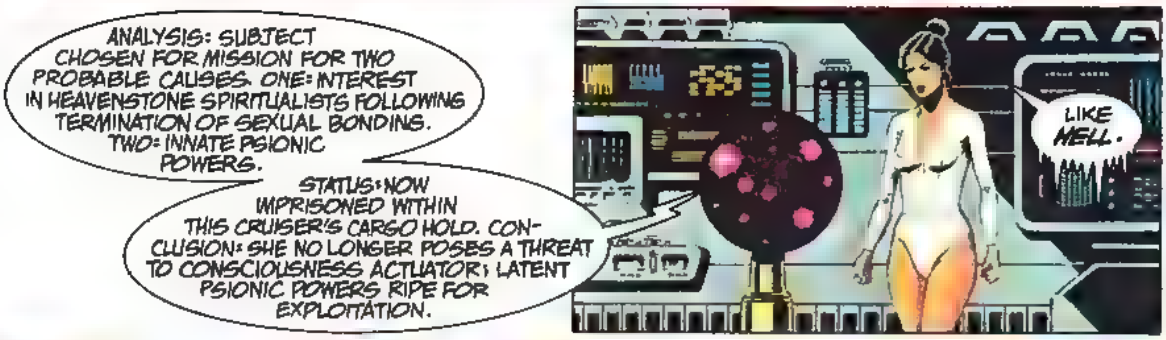
GO TO HELL.

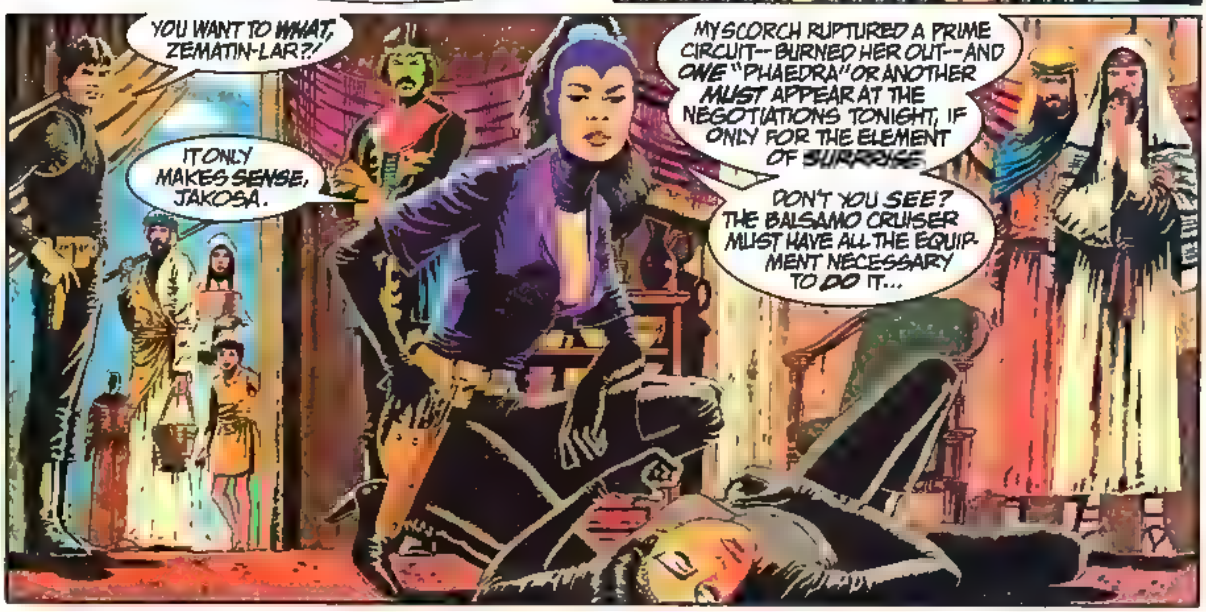

MORNING. FAR FROM THE SETTLEMENT.
AS MEN OF DEEP SPIRIT TEND A DOCILE FLOCK...
...THE GROUND OF HEAVEN SPLITS ASUNDER, AND YAWNS WIDE...
...UNTIL SOMETHING HELLISH RISES FROM BELOW.
SECRETLY, THE ROBED MEN ARE SHAMED BY ITS LOOMING PRESENCE, BY ITS SHADOW DARKLY STAINING THE LANDSCAPE OF THEIR PARADISE.
OPENLY, NEITHER MEN NOR BEASTS PAY IT MUCH HEED; IT IS, BY NOW, AN ALL TOO FAMILIAR SIGHT...
IT IS THE PLATFORM FOR THIS NIGHT'S SCHEDULED PEACE NEGOTIATIONS.
AND, TOO, IT IS THE SITE OF A BALSAMO MILITARY BASE, ARMED TO THE METAL TEETH...


BUT MANNED ONLY BY FACSIMILES OF MEN.
ARE YOU CERTAIN PHAEDRA HAS BEEN CAPTURED?
SO THE CALL REPORTED, COMMANDER SHRIKE--ALTHOUGH THE CRUISER HAS SINCE FAILED TO RESPOND TO OUR CALLS.
THEN WE CAN'T BE CERTAIN THE FAX-WOMAN WAS DEPLOYED?
NO, COMMANDER SHRIKE.
SEND A SQUAD IN SEARCH OF THE CRUISER.
I SAID GIVE ME A FULL READ-OUT ON BALSAMO AMBASSADOR PHAEDRA--
--AND THIS TIME, OBEY MY REQUEST.
BEFORE THE "NEGO-TIATIONS" PROCEED, WE MUST HAVE THE REAL PHAEDRA AT LEAST IN OUR GRASP..
TENTH WARNING: SECURITY-LOCK-- AUTHORIZED ACCESS ONLY.
...AND PREFERABLY OFF THIS MOON ALTOGETHER, EN ROUTE TO BAL-SAMO.
DAMN YOU AND THE WORLD THAT MADE YOU!
JAKOSA WAS RIGHT FROM THE START--MY OWN WORLD HAS DUPED ME, EVEN TRIED TO KILL ME--AND THE PEACE CONVENTION IS NOTHING BUT A SHAM TO COVER A PLANNED PARBEAM ATTACK ON AXELLON.
BELOW, NOT EVERY BEAST IS DOCILE.
THEY'VE EXPLOITED MY SYMPATHY FOR THE HEAVENSTONE SPIRITUAL-ISTS--AND I'VE GOT TO KNOW PRECISELY WHY BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!
BUT HOW--? HOW CAN I BREACH THE COMPUTER'S SECURITY-LOCK? HOW CAN I--
MIND-PRIME!


THE FIVE ELDERS--THEIR LIFE-FORCE SAID EVERY WORK OF MAN'S HAND IS CONFERRED WITH A SPARK, HOWEVER DIM, WHICH IS PART OF THE ALL....
I'VE GOT TO FAN THAT SPARK...MAKE IT RESPOND TO--
Mind-Prime.
Mind-Prime.
MIND-PRIME!!
WELCOME--YOUR THOUGHTS ARE MINE--MY INFORMATON IS YOURS.
PHAEDRA: LIEUTENANT OF PEACE-MILITARY GREAT-GRANDDAUGHTER OF HEAVENSTONE'S SUPREME ARCHITECT; CO-CONCEIVER OF PLAN TO DESTROY AXELLON; COVER-GUISE "AMBASSADOR AND PEACE NEGOTIATOR."
WHAT THE--?!
BONDED WITH SHRIKE, COMMANDER OF PEACE-MILITARY AND CO-CONCEIVER OF PLAN TO DESTROY AXELLON.
WITH SHRIKE?!
PHAEDRA ASSASSINATED 9/3/23:09; CORPSE NEVER RECOVERED; SIMULACRUM INTERRED IN SEALED CENOTAPH; ASSASSINS LATER DETERMINED TO BE AGENTS OF SIRIUS HUB.
I...I'M DEAD?!
SIRIANS UNAWARE WE POSSESS KNOWLEDGE OF ASSASSINATION OR OF THEIR SUBSEQUENT REPLACEMENT WITH AN AGENT COSMETICALLY AND NEURALLY ALTERED TO RESEMBLE PHAEDRA IN EVERY WAY.
INDEED, AGENT'S MEMORY HAS BEEN SO EFFECTIVELY RECONSTRUCTED THAT EVEN SHE BELIEVES SHE IS PHAEDRA, AND IS UNAWARE OF HER OWN LATENT PSIONIC POWERS.
I...I'M ACTUALLY SIRIAN... A DOUBLE-AGENT... AND I'VE BEEN USED... EXPLOITED... TWICE...

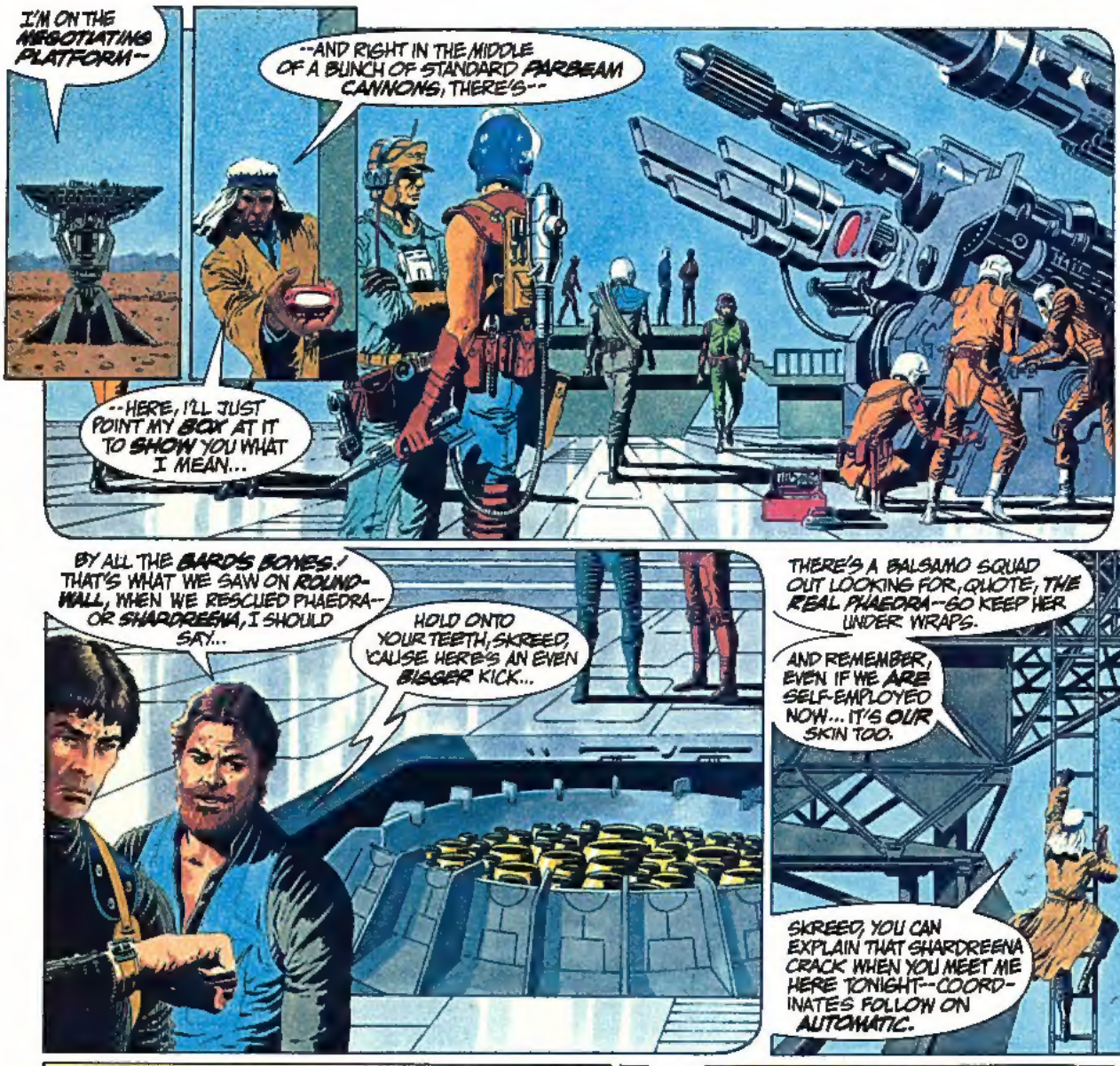
THIS FALSE PHAEDRA WAS SEIZED IMMEDIATELY, AND HER MEMORY WAS FURTHER ALTERED BY BALSAMO SURGEONS TO THE EXTENT THAT SHE NOW BELIEVES HERSELF TO BE WHAT WAS MERELY THE REAL PHAEDRA'S COVER-GUISE: AMBASSADOR AND PEACE NEGOTIATOR.
STATS ON HER TRUE AND FORMER IDENTITY FOLLOW...
NAME: SHARDREENA; PLANET OF ORIGIN: CANUS; SIRIUS SWARM; AGE: 26; HEIGHT: 233 xc; WEIGHT: 79 lv; OCCUPATION: CRYSTAL HEALER.
SEXUAL: HETERO, STRICTLY MONOGAMOUS, FORMERLY BONDED TO JAKOSA LONE, ALSO AN AGENT OF SIRIUS HUB; RELATIONSHIP TERMINATED IN TRAUMA.


ANALYSIS: SUBJECT CHOSEN FOR MISSION FOR TWO PROBABLE CAUSES. ONE: INTEREST IN HEAVENSTONE SPIRITUALISTS FOLLOWING TERMINATION OF SEXUAL BONDING. TWO: INNATE PSIONIC POWERS.
STATUS: NOW IMPRISONED WITHIN THIS CRUISER'S CARGO HOLD. CONCLUSION: SHE NO LONGER POSES A THREAT TO CONSCIOUSNESS ACTUATOR; LATENT PSIONIC POWERS RIPE FOR EXPLOITATION.
LIKE HELL.


YOU WANT TO WHAT, ZEMATIN-LAR?!
IT ONLY MAKES SENSE, JAKOSA.
MY SCORCH RUPTURED A PRIME CIRCUIT--BURNED HER OUT--AND ONE "PHAEDRA" OR ANOTHER MUST APPEAR AT THE NEGOTIATIONS TONIGHT, IF ONLY FOR THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.
DON'T YOU SEE? THE BALSAMO CRUISER MUST HAVE ALL THE EQUIPMENT NECESSARY TO DO IT...

FORGET IT, ZEMATIN! THERE'S NO WAY I'D LET YOU TRANSFER YOUR PSYCHE INTO THAT...THAT THING!
I DON'T CARE HOW MUCH YOU LOVE MACHINES, IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK IT--
JAKOSA LONE, ARE YOU PREPARED FOR A VOICE FROM YOUR PAST?
EH? PHAEDRA!
SHE'S STILL IN THE BALSAMO CRUISER! SHE WAS THERE ALL ALONG--EVEN WHEN YOU "RESCUED" THE FAX-WOMAN DUPLICATE!
YES, LaMASQUE... BUT EVEN I AM NOT THE REAL PHAEDRA... NOT TRULY.
I AM... SHARDREENA.
NO ONE CAN FEEL THE SHOCK MORE THAN JAKOSA--AND YET, EVEN AS IT FLOODS THROUGH HIS MIND, HE IS THE FIRST TO ACCEPT THAT IT MUST BE TRUE...
SHARDREENA?! THEN...WHEN SHE DISAPPEARED, SHE WAS...NO...OH NO... IT CAN'T BE...
IT IS YOU, AND WE HAVE HAD A SHARED PAST...WHEN YOUR NAME, YOUR FACE, YOUR VOICE...WERE DIFFERENT...WHEN WE WERE BOTH DIFFERENT, AND WE--
DON'T SAY IT!
I DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN US...
...WHAT MADE ME LOATHE THE PERSON FOR WHOM I NOW FEEL SUCH PROFOUND LOVE.
LISTEN TO ME, SHAR--PHAEDRA--DESPITE WHAT HAPPENED, I STILL FEEL ONLY--
SAVE IT, JAKOSA.
IF THIS WAS THE ONLY WAY SIRIUS HUB COULD GET YOU AND I TO SHARE THE SAME SOLAR SYSTEM--BY REDECORATING MY MEMORIES--
--THEN LOVE SURE AS HELL WASN'T THE ONLY JOLT BETWEEN OUR EYES.

PHAEDRA, PLEASE...
AND PAINTING YOU OUT OF MY MIND DIDN'T EVEN WORK.
AS SOON AS I SENSED YOU FROM ROUND-WALL--AND EVEN MORE WHEN I SAW YOU FOR THE "FIRST" TIME--MY MIND WAS ALMOST STOPPED DEAD BY THE CONFLICT OF LOVING WHAT I HATE...
OR WAS IT HATING WHAT I LOVE?
AS MUCH AS WHAT THE ELDERS DID, IT WAS YOUR PROXIMITY WHICH TRIGGERED MY LATENT POWERS--SHOCKED THEM TO THE SURFACE--JUST AS YOU AND YOUR SIRIAN EMPLOYERS NO DOUBT HOPED.
I HOPE YOU'RE HAPPY, JAKOSA...BECAUSE NOW I'M GOING TO DO WHAT I'VE ALWAYS LACKED THE COURAGE TO DO.
BUT I HAVE ONE THING TO THANK YOU FOR...
NO, PHAEDRA.
SHARDREENA--I DIDN'T KNOW.
BUT THE IMAGE OF TRUTH HAS ALREADY FADED...
AND ONLY THE COUNTERFEIT REMAINS, MOCKING.
WHAT DID SHE MEAN? THE COURAGE TO DO WHAT?
WELL...SHE SAID SHE WANTED TO JOIN THE SPIRITUALISTS AFTER SHE AND JAKOSA--
YES--WHICH MAY BE REAL REASON JAKOSA ACCEPTED THIS MISSION.
BUT GROD THINKS MAYBE SHE WANTED TO GO FARTHER THAN THAT, LaMASQUE... AND JOIN SPIRIT ITSELF!
JAKOSA? WE HAVE TO GO TO THE CRUISER ANYWAY...TO REPAIR THE FAX-WOMAN...
WE DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING, ZEMATIN.
OUR "MISSION" HAS BECOME ONE HUGE KNOT OF TREACHERY, AND OUR "EMPLOYERS," AS SHE CALLED THEM, ARE NOTHING BUT--
AND YET, JAKOSA, LONE, FOR WHATEVER VENAL REASONS SIRIUS HUB INITIATED IT, YOUR MISSION'S SUCCESS WOULD PRESERVE LIVES...
STARV HERE--AND I JUST HIT THE VERY DARK JACKPOT, JAKOSA...

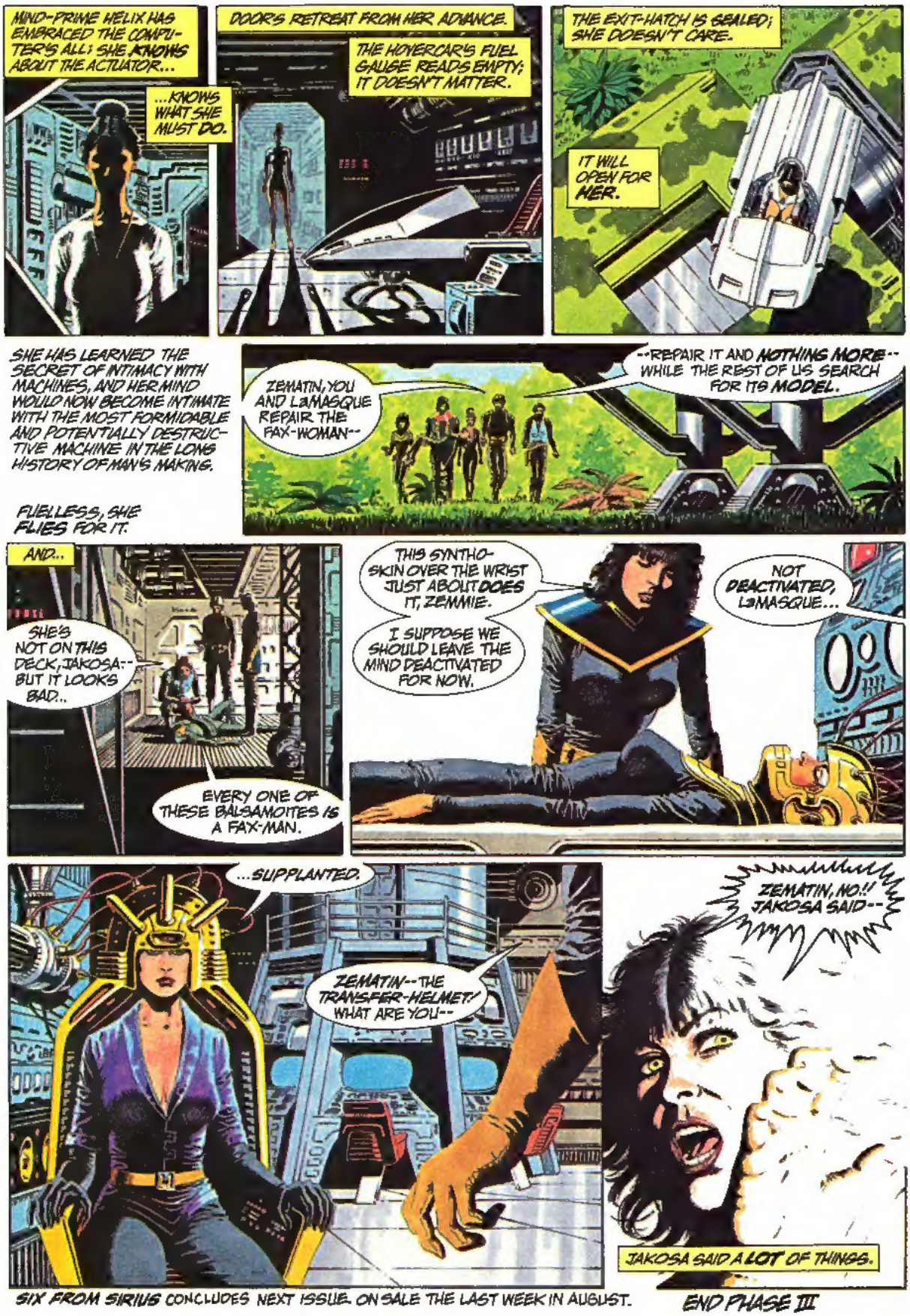

I'M ON THE NEGOTIATING PLATFORM--
--AND RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A BUNCH OF STANDARD PARBEAM CANNONS, THERE'S--
--HERE, I'LL JUST POINT MY BOX AT IT TO SHOW YOU WHAT I MEAN...

BY ALL THE BARD'S BONES! THAT'S WHAT WE SAW ON ROUND-WALL, WHEN WE RESCUED PHAEDRA--OR SHARDREENA, I SHOULD SAY...
HOLD ONTO YOUR TEETH, SKREED, 'CAUSE HERE'S AN EVEN BIGGER KICK...

THERE'S A BALSAMO SQUAD OUT LOOKING FOR, QUOTE, THE REAL PHAEDRA--GO KEEP HER UNDER WRAPS.
AND REMEMBER, EVEN IF WE ARE SELF-EMPLOYED NOW... IT'S OUR SKIN TOO.
SKREED, YOU CAN EXPLAIN THAT SHARDREENA CRACK WHEN YOU MEET ME HERE TONIGHT--COORDINATES FOLLOW ON AUTOMATIC.

CLICKING ALMOST INAUDIBLY, JAKOSA'S BOX RECIEVES AND STORES STARN'S LOCATION FOR LATER ACCESS.
A BALSAMO SQUAD, JAKOSA... DOES THAT SETTLE IT?
BUT FOR LONG MOMENTS HE SAYS NOTHING, GAZING DEEPLY INTO THE SERENE FACE OF THE SPIRITUALIST LEADER... AND THEN--

LET'S GO.
THE DECISION WAS NEVER IN DOUBT; HE MERELY FOUGHT IT, LOSING AS HE KNEW AND HOPED HE WOULD.
HE MUST SEE HER AGAIN...
...MUST SEE THE WOMAN WITH WHOM HE HAS TWICE FALLEN IN LOVE.


MIND-PRIME HELIX HAS EMBRACED THE COMPUTER'S ALL: SHE KNOWS ABOUT THE ACTUATOR...
...KNOWS WHAT SHE MUST DO.
DOOR'S RETREAT FROM HER ADVANCE.
THE HOVERCAR'S FUEL GAUGE READS EMPTY; IT DOESN'T MATTER.
THE EXIT-HATCH IS SEALED; SHE DOESN'T CARE.
IT WILL OPEN FOR HER.
SHE HAS LEARNED THE SECRET OF INTIMACY WITH MACHINES, AND HER MIND WOULD NOW BECOME INTIMATE WITH THE MOST FORMIDABLE AND POTENTIALLY DESTRUCTIVE MACHINE IN THE LONG HISTORY OF MAN'S MAKING.
FUELLESS, SHE FLIES FOR IT.
ZEMATIN, YOU AND LaMASQUE REPAIR THE FAX-WOMAN--
--REPAIR IT AND NOTHING MORE-- WHILE THE REST OF US SEARCH FOR ITS MODEL.
AND...
SHE'S NOT ON THIS DECK, JAKOSA-- BUT IT LOOKS BAD...
EVERY ONE OF THESE BALSAMOITES IS A FAX-MAN.
THIS SYNTHO-SKIN OVER THE WRIST JUST ABOUT DOES IT, ZEMMIE.
I SUPPOSE WE SHOULD LEAVE THE MIND DEACTIVATED FOR NOW.
NOT DEACTIVATED, LaMASQUE...
...SUPPLANTED.
ZEMATIN--THE TRANSFER-HELMET! WHAT ARE YOU--
ZEMATIN, NO!! JAKOSA SAID--
JAKOSA SAID A LOT OF THINGS.

SIX FROM SIRIUS CONCLUDES NEXT ISSUE. ON SALE THE LAST WEEK IN AUGUST.

END PHASE III